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The Development of Confucian Ethics in the Teachings of Itô Jinsai

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Abstract

Among the scholars who studied Confucianism in Edo period Japan there were those who devoted their time particularly to the study of Confucian ethics. Itô Jinsai is most often considered as an intermediary between the ideas of the Zhu Xi School, of which he was a critic, and the Sorai School, which in many ways he helped inspire, but also as a proper Confucian ethicist. As interpreting Confucian ethics within the field of comparative philosophy has come a long way recently, I would like to examine Jinsai's project through the prism of some of the newest proposed readings.

Keywords: Edo period, Itô Jinsai, Confucian ethics, comparative philosophy, embodiment

要旨

江戸時代の日本において儒学を研究した学者の中には、特に儒学道徳に多くの時間を割いた者がいる。なかでも伊藤仁斎は、朱子学を批判し、徂徠学派に影響を与えながらも、両者の思想を結びつけた者として有名である。彼は本義的に儒学道徳者であった。昨今、比較哲学の分野における儒学道徳の研究も少なからず行われるようになってきたが、本論文は最新の研究書を参照しながら伊藤仁斎の思想を考察する。

キーワード：江戸時代、伊藤仁斎、儒学道徳、比較哲学、身体化

1. Research project outline

My research concerns the teachings of the Edo period 江戸 (1600-1867) Japanese scholar, Itô Jinsai 伊藤仁斎 (1627-1705) whose works are usually studied in the context of that which came before—the work of scholars who followed what Maruyama Masao describes as the Zhu Xi¹ mode of thought (Maruyama 1974: 19-68)—and that which came after him—a dissolution of the Zhu Xi mode of thought², most famously exemplified by the teachings of another Edo period teacher, Ogyû Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666-1728). Though such interpretations of Jinsai's place in the intellectual history of Edo period Japan may seem somewhat simplified and often even ideologically suspect, it can easily be said that Jinsai was indeed a critical student of the Zhu Xi School of Structural Principle 理学, as well as a scholar who went against the mainstream academic currents of his time³.

The intellectual history of the Edo period of Japan has been well studied, both by Japanese as well as by non-Japanese scholars⁴. The vibrant intellectual culture of the time left a deep mark on Japanese society and can be studied from myriad angles. Needless to say, many of its great names were concerned with the study of Confucian ideology, which found its expression in a variety of forms. Confucianism is known to have had a great resurgence in Japan of the time, acting as the ruling Shogunate's official ideology, but also as having a much broader impact than just this. The interpretation that was brought from Korea and held in the highest regard at the beginning of the Edo period was that of the famous Song Dynasty Chinese scholar Zhu Xi. Many famous Japanese scholars, such as Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583-1657) the founder of Hayashi University and Yamazaki Ansai 山崎闇斎 (1619-1682) generally considered to have represented the Zhu Xi orthodoxy, tried more or less faithfully to follow Zhu Xi's teachings; but it also did not take long before critical readings of Zhu Xi's works appeared as well.

One of the scholars most directly engaged in the criticism of Zhu Xi's School of Structural Principle was Itô Jinsai. Primarily occupied with trying to further the proper understanding of Confucian ethics—being very passionate in his study of both the *Analects* 論語 and the *Mencius* 孟子 as well as the works of Zhu Xi and other Confucian scholars—Jinsai tried to point out ways in which he believed

Confucian teachings had been corrupted by the heterodox influences of Buddhism and Daoism and tried to steer scholars back in the direction of reading the ancient works for themselves. As Confucianism itself is a tradition that has always been interested in the question of ethics, the study of the ethical principles of Confucianism also flourished in Edo period Japan—again finding many different expressions, representing the teachings of different scholars who in fact differed both in their methodologies and in many of their core concepts, as well as in their views on proper Confucian study and conduct.

Jinsai's work, as mentioned, can be seen as a project of rejecting Zhu Xi's key notions, considered by Jinsai to be too life-denying and corrupted by influences that he did not believe followed Confucius' 孔子 (551BC-479BC) teachings—especially the all-encompassing notion of the structural principle 理 (De Bary 2005: 205, 206). But, as John Allen Tucker notes, Jinsai's work can also be seen as a critical development of Zhu Xi's ideas that follows the path already begun in other works, such as Chen Beixi's 陳北溪 (1156-1223) *Seiri jigi* 性理字義—a view by which, working within the genre of Confucian lexicography, Jinsai did not in fact outright reject the Zhu Xi doctrine but merely took the next step in its development (Tucker 1998: 18-29). Though Tucker's reading, namely that Jinsai's critical views originate from the fact that he was himself a Kyoto *chônin* 町人 who developed his thought diametrically opposite to the more prevalent versions of Confucian ethics of the time inspired by the life of the samurai, again seems a bit simplistic in the light of Jinsai's own well thought out intellectual goals, the view that Jinsai does not offer a definite refutation of Zhu Xi's views but rather a certain shift of emphasis is also quite plausible.

In any case, Jinsai is considered to be a critic or a critical student of the Zhu Xi School—with the main points of his works turning away from the expansive metaphysics of the Zhu Xi model, turning away from the emphasis on discussions of structural principle 理 and turning towards the generative force 氣—away from the abstract and towards the practical; towards discussing people's natural tendencies 性 in terms of feelings 情 instead of the structural principle 理, and as seeing the way of humanity 人道 as fundamentally separate from the way of heaven 天道. In studying Jinsai's treatment of these notions both his agreements and disagreements with Zhu Xi can be well appreciated.

So, how far does Jinsai's own professed project need to be taken into account? In his key works Jinsai shows no sign of being interested in the ideological or political questions of the day—being a professional scholar who declined any official position and who also passed through many doctrines before settling on Ancient Confucianism as being the right one for him—and his own chosen work was in establishing the philological lineage of Confucian ideas: to distinguish such ideas from other, heterodox ideas, which supposedly crept into the teachings of Chinese schools in the Song dynasty 宋 (960-1867). Although his work can in many ways generally be considered a rejection of the Tokugawa academic mainstream, it can also be studied more directly from the point of view of its philosophical content—that is to say, allowed to become a relevant discussion on Confucian ethics.

Working within the genre of Confucian lexicography, Jinsai engages in a thorough conceptual analysis of Confucian notions from the point of view not merely of scriptural fidelity, but primarily of what he sees as proper Confucian ethical theory—by implication leading to proper Confucian practical conduct. Coming at the end of a powerful religious re-examination of Confucianism—in the form of the Song 宋 (960-1867) and Ming 明 (1368-1644) dynasties Chinese schools of thought, such as those of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1427-1529)—and explicitly aimed at steering scholarly attention back to the original teachings of Confucius and Mencius 孟子 (372BC-289BC), Jinsai's work is characterized by a rigorous study of the ancient notions and can, according to Huang Chun-chieh, be considered as a type of Confucian hermeneutics in East Asia (Huang 2008: 247).

John Allen Tucker points out:

However else Jinsai's *Gomô jigi* might be understood, it is surely describable as a text evincing a passionate devotion (*philo*) to sagely learning and moral wisdom (*sophos*). By implication it seems that Jinsai merits recognition as one of Tokugawa Japan's early modern philosophers. (Tucker 1998: 53)

In his works Jinsai himself seems primarily interested in Confucian ethics: in the nature of man and his place in the world between Heaven and Earth, not only as taught by Confucius and Mencius, but as Jinsai himself was convinced represented the one true and timeless way. Jinsai's works can therefore be read in the manner that he himself seems to have intended: as a thorough study of Confucian ethics through which he intended to elucidate the way 道 itself.

As Confucian ethics are today much studied by philosophers, and exciting new readings of the ancient ideas are being offered, commentaries such as the *Gomô jiggi* 語孟字義, the *Dôjimon* 童子問 and the *Rongo kogi* 論語古義, which offer a thorough re-examination of Confucian teachings as well as an outside cultural point of view, seem to be a fruitful ground to revisit—we would do well to re-examine Jinsai's work through the lens of present-day comparative philosophy.

2. Research question and its relevance

As comparative philosophy grows ever more careful of how it approaches certain traditions, new study methods and new readings of old teachings are being proposed.

I would like to study Jinsai through the prism of some of the latest proposed readings, firstly to offer an updated look into Jinsai's relationship with Confucian ethics, and secondly, to try to determine in what way particular concepts presented by Jinsai fit into present-day philosophical research into said ethics. Can Jinsai's teachings offer certain important insights into concepts that today are being explored by philosophers primarily through the lens of Confucian ethics? Can they—having grown out of studying classical Confucian texts but developed within the cultural context of Edo period Japan—in some way help to illuminate important aspects of Confucian teachings and offer further insights into concepts that comparative philosophy is trying to understand through the study of Confucian ideas?

As Confucian teachings in general, and Jinsai's interpretation in particular, cannot be transcribed onto the European philosophical tradition in a simple manner, a variety of comparative approaches have been tried in the past. My

own approach centers on trying to see Jinsai's work through the prism of different modern interpretations, trying to combine insights into both the hermeneutical and the ethical nature of Jinsai's teachings and Confucian tradition in general, as well as coming to terms with elements of the theory of embodied knowledge which could also be shown to be very relevant to Jinsai's project. It would seem the breadth of Confucian teachings warrants such a broad and, perhaps, at first glance, scattered approach—as simple comparisons do not seem to offer good enough results.

A fairly recent interpretation of Confucian ethics has been proposed by Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger Ames, who argue that classical Confucianism must be considered a *sui generis* ethical system: a kind of role ethics⁵. I would also like to try and read Jinsai's work through the prism of this proposed interpretation—or at the very least through some of its key points—so as to establish whether such a reading might be appropriate for interpreting Jinsai's teachings or whether Jinsai's work falls outside of it—and if this is the case, whether it is because Jinsai diverges from Confucian ethics in some key points or if such proposed readings are themselves simply too narrow to encompass the different branches of Confucian ethics.

Also, if Confucian role ethics are not the proper interpretation of Jinsai's ethical system, can such readings still offer a prism through which his works might in some way be examined? Even if the answers presented in the Confucian-role-ethics interpretation do not wholly agree with Jinsai's project, the questions raised by Rosemont and Ames seem important and must be asked about Jinsai's teachings as well: questions into the nature of language, into family and familial roles, questions into the nature of hierarchies, and—as I hope to show—most importantly, the question of the body-self as opposed to the abstract individual self which can in many ways be considered the basis of all the main European ethical traditions.

Furthermore, I would like to study Jinsai's thought from the point of view of his own methodology. In this sense Huang, quoting Koyasu Nobukuni, shows how Jinsai eschewed the highly abstract terminology of the Cheng-Zhu school for a different approach: studying the words of Confucius and Mencius both in

an intertextual as well as an intratextual manner (Huang 2008: 251), and trying to demonstrate their overall coherence. Such an approach was bound to produce different, though no less interesting, results.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

I primarily follow the methodology of comparative philosophy, keeping in mind that the comparison does not only occur at the conceptual level but at the categorical level as well. I also pay my dues to the strict contextual demands of the study of intellectual history. It should be pointed out that Jinsai's teachings have previously been discussed from the point of view of western philosophical categories, as well as from the point of view of Confucian categories, but as the methods of comparative ethics grow more and more aware of the difficulties of unbiased research and philosophy hones its concepts, interesting new perspectives arise. That said, there are certain methodological elements that must be considered.

The different texts should be read in their original form and comparative methods carried out with special care for differing and shifting contexts. Following Jinsai's own methods of research, there must also be a clear understanding of both the meaning and the semantic lineage 意味血脈 of ideas—that is, the intellectual history of the ideas being discussed; to not try and force one set of categories over another, but to engage in respectful and constructive comparison. It is imperative that all these distinctions be kept clear and that they be reflected throughout. It may also be noted that a specific study of language plays a key role in Jinsai's own research method (as described for example in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 73-79)⁶, as well as in how modern comparative ethicists argue for certain aspects of Confucian role ethics (see for example Rosemont 2015: 25-28).

The scope of the research should aim to mirror the extent to which certain forms of Confucian thought pertain to Jinsai's own teachings. It must be chosen carefully, so that there can be minimal doubt as to whether the findings are relevant. In the same vein, the concepts found in present day philosophical discourse should also be considered carefully before used for comparison and demonstration. As I am trying to engage in concept comparison from the point

of view of the present-day philosophical study of Confucian ethics, the scope might necessarily at some points be broader and at some points be narrower than that of the established research of Jinsai's works.

Thirdly, there is the specific context of Jinsai's own project. His approach was to study Confucian ideas—both their meaning and their lineage—and to arrive at a proper understanding (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 73-79.). As already noted, proper understanding for Jinsai did not merely mean proper reading of the scripture, but was rather shown in proper everyday conduct and attitude. It can be argued that Jinsai never truly managed to recover the teachings of Confucius and Mencius—that he instead offered an interpretation of those teachings with its own specific conceptual peculiarities—but his professed project cannot be completely ignored as his own underlying motivation, nor can we ignore how his project plays into the general hermeneutical nature of the Confucian tradition⁷. A study of these specific points should allow me to further explicate aspects of Jinsai's own work — especially what he himself considered to be the meaning behind his work and how much bearing this had on his methods.

Therefore, I would like to access Jinsai's project from the point of view of his own conceptual analysis—to engage with his ethical thought and to show how Jinsai actually offered an interpretation of Confucian ethics that can be illuminating even to comparative philosophers engaged in the study of Confucian ethics today. My plan is to delve into Jinsai's notions directly and to show how a relative 'change of emphasis' could very well be considered a 'rejection of a system of thought' when the relationship between theory and practice in Confucian traditions as well as Jinsai's own attitudes are carefully considered. Even though Jinsai might have developed Zhu Xi's ethics in a certain way instead of breaking with them, his concepts are actually far more deeply rooted in the concrete, the mundane and the secular, and therefore help to illuminate very different aspects of Confucian ethics than those of Zhu Xi, all of which brings Jinsai to a largely different vision of proper Confucian life.

Next, I would like to try to determine if Jinsai can be read from the point of view of Confucian role ethics—or at the very least if his teachings possess some of the characteristics proposed in that reading. Confucian role ethics start

by saying that an abstract rational individual does not comprise the basis of Confucian ethical discourse (Rosemont 2015: 33-53)—that the self is fundamentally a sliding and shifting image, a combination of the roles one plays—for example in the family in which they are first defined—and goes on to thoroughly inhabit (ibid.). This last part is also extremely important for the understanding of Confucian ethics: the roles one inhabits are not an act—they represent a proper, albeit shifting, identity. As Confucian role ethics offer an interesting possible interpretation of Confucian ethics, I consider them an important interpretative reference for my research—while also being careful not to approach Jinsai’s teaching with prejudice. I believe such readings offer an important place to start, but I also believe trying to apply this interpretation to Jinsai might prove to be less than straightforward and might have some unforeseen and interesting effects.

This does not present a problem for my research, but an opportunity. If, as has been proposed here, Confucianism is its own *sui generis* ethical system, then such a system may have the scope to accommodate many different and differing interpretations—provided they are compatible on certain defining points. I intend to show which of Jinsai’s concepts play an important part of the present day study of Confucian ethics and which diverge from it more fundamentally—not to judge the worth of one or the other but simply to point out the potential of the development of Confucian ethics along different lines. Examples may range from examining the ways in which Jinsai’s concepts of the body-self and its ethical dimensions may offer an insight into Confucian filial piety 孝, or demonstrating that a lack of an explicitly complex metaphysical system does not in fact mean the lack of complexity in Jinsai’s conception of the world and humankind’s place in it.

While the biographies and the history surrounding Jinsai and other scholars under review should be taken into account, I do not plan on making any special hypotheses concerning how their way of life influenced their works, but would rather like their work to primarily speak for itself—only pointing out conceptual discrepancies where they arise.

4. Hypothesis and preliminary results

My hypothesis begins with accepting that Jinsai's own project—his criticism of the Confucian concepts as developed by Zhu Xi and others—does not in fact bring him back to Confucius' and Mencius' original teachings. What I do think it does, and does very well, is offer a version of Confucian ethics, which, while they stand removed from their original cultural context, are nevertheless born of Jinsai's own strenuous efforts to come as close to the ethical core of what Confucius and Mencius taught as possible: a hermeneutical approach, which in fact mirrors the hermeneutical tendencies of Confucian teachings as such. When the ethical elements of this approach are made clear, the next step is to try and locate Jinsai's ideas within the present day study of Confucian ethics, especially comparing Jinsai's readings to that of Confucian ethics as a form of role ethics.

Applying the role ethics view to Jinsai's teachings, the question of the self arises naturally. The Confucian role ethics hypothesis, as discussed, goes against basing Confucian ethics on any sort of abstract individual self in the sense of European ethical traditions. Rather it presents the human experience as an ever-shifting array of different roles, which constitute the only real self. Such a starting point must thus already be construed as a notable shift in how ethical thought is approached and developed. It is interesting that this reading can be seen in how Jinsai structures the relationship between the independent way 道 and virtues 德, both existing outside of the human self, but also accepts Mencian theory that the heart-mind 心 is itself structured around the four sprouts 四端 of said virtues. The question of whether the way or the heart-mind is the primary vessel of virtue does not have a simple answer and is a dynamic point of discussion.

Furthermore, when questioned on what might nevertheless stand as the one identifying feature of a Confucian role-bearing person across all the different roles, Rosemont answers it would probably have to be the notion of the body (Rosemont 2015: 52-53). I believe the body can be considered a central notion of Jinsai's own teachings as well—albeit one that at first glance interestingly remains quite unreflected upon in his central works. Prioritizing generative force 氣 instead of the structural principle 理

(Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 14-20) and considering the inborn human qualities 性 as belonging to concrete generative force 氣質 (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 48-73), again without connecting them to the concept of the structural principle 理, Jinsai establishes the body-self 身 in his own particular manner.

Jinsai in fact spends no time describing the body as such and he does not explicitly explore how the body-self functions as a body-self. But from his conception of the self—from the point of view of the already noted peculiar relationship between inborn qualities 性, the virtues 德, the way 道, as well as the mind-heart 心 and the human feelings 情, one can draw observations on the nature of the self and the body in his teachings. It seems very much possible to show that the self in Jinsai's teachings never transcends the body-self, but that the body-self itself possesses certain dimensions that transcend common concepts of the body: such as the ethical, the spiritual, and the cultural dimensions into which the body-self extends.

The body is necessarily a different form of self than an abstract individual self—it is never abstract, cannot be lifted out of its environments, and has certain defined characteristics (one of which is of course also the relationship it has with the family); the embodied knowledge is of course then also further influenced by these factors. The body is important to Confucians as a keepsake one receives from one's parents⁸, but it is in fact much more than that and my hypothesis is that it can be shown to be just as central an idea to Jinsai's works (and perhaps even to Confucian ethics in general) as the family is—that in fact the family may actually represent certain primary extensions of the body in its cultural and ethical dimensions.

Jinsai follows the Mencian doctrine of the inborn good, just as Zhu Xi, but diverges from Zhu Xi's ideas in that he connects this notion neither with the concept of the structural principle 理 nor with the concept of the principle of heaven 天理 (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 49-56). Jinsai always places emphasis on the generative force 氣 and its particular manifestations (ibid.). Mencius' good inborn qualities 善性 are just like a person's four limbs—they are something that the body naturally possesses and that it can use to one degree or another (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 54-56); the body possesses

the sprouts of its ethical and ritualistic dimensions. Extending the sprouts of the heart-mind 心 through learning is the fundamental labor in Jinsai's teachings, what such extending entails in practice is the fundamental question of his discussions on ethics.

The family can then be considered to act as the primary environment of such extendedness—this itself represented by filial piety 孝—as well as to have special ties to the body through the parent/child relationship, which, as noted, is so important to Confucianism. Of course special ties to the body are not in themselves the prerequisite for extending the ethical-, cultural- and value-giving dimensions of the body-self, but they cannot, within Confucian norms, be disregarded. The nature of ethical knowledge as embodied⁹ is also very important: there can be no proper ethical knowledge beyond the embodied and no proper ethical conduct beyond the conduct of the body-self. This is, in a sense, why Jinsai calls the structural principle 理 a dead term and stresses that only the way 道 can encompass the myriad expressions of the living universe. To him only practice, not abstract principle, can in fact represent the way 道 and virtue 德.

Also important then is Jinsai's insistence that the body-self (as the embodiment of inborn qualities and knowledge) possesses feelings 情 which fundamentally move it. Jinsai goes against the strict life-denying qualities of what he perceives to be Zhu Xi's way of thinking and stresses the quality of feelings; that desires 欲 as such also include the desire for proper conduct. It is in some ways an aesthetical tendency which Jinsai likens to the eye's desire for beautiful images or the tongue's for good food (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 138-139). Of course people desire to not be ashamed—without this desire and the feeling behind it, what would drive people's actions? That feelings as such should be considered as actually set against the original good nature seems wrong to Jinsai—what would people's motivation even be without feelings 情 and desires 欲? What would move people to do what they do (ibid.)?

And yet Jinsai does not claim that the four beginnings 四端 of Mencius' good nature 善性 are themselves any kind of feelings or emotions—nor are they any kind of thought. Jinsai points out Mencius' own teachings on

what people cannot endure and cannot do and categorizes this as a fundamental characteristic of the heart-mind 心. Affection for others, a sense of shame, a sense of valuing something over something else, and a distinction of right and wrong are the workings of the heart-mind, not specific thoughts or feelings (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 56-58). Extending these beginnings means thoroughly embodying virtue, extending the body from the inborn qualities of one person into the universal way 道—through learning 学 (Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971: 72-77)—which can be considered the key Confucian project.

The research should show the extent to which these concepts can in fact be considered in line with Jinsai's own ideas and in what ways they might offer further insight into Confucian teachings as such. The concepts discussed also offer a certain direction in the study of Jinsai's ideas through the lens of Confucian role ethics and other newest philosophical readings of Confucian works—and even though some of these interpretations may not be compatible in the end, they still seem to offer plenty of topics for fruitful comparative research.

5. Conclusion

The research should show how the hermeneutical and ethical elements of the Confucian tradition are employed in Jinsai's teachings. It should also show how Jinsai's own project can be studied from the point of view of modern comparative philosophy: how elements of the role ethics interpretation as well as theories of embodied knowledge can in fact be shown in many aspects of Jinsai's own interpretation of Confucius' and Mencius' teachings. Bringing these different interpretations together might then be able to further the understanding of each individual one.

¹ After the Chinese scholar Zhu Xi 朱子 (1130-1200).

² For Maruyama's study, see Maruyama (1974).

³ For a recent study of Jinsai's work by a Japanese scholar see for example Koyasu (2015). For an example of non-Japanese scholarship see the introductory study in John Allen Tucker's translation of the *Gomô Jigi* 語孟字義 (Tucker 1998).

⁴ See for example de Bary (2005) or Paramore (2016).

⁵ For an introduction to the study of Confucian role ethics, see for example Rosemont (2015).

⁶ For the purposes of this study I have summarized Jinsai's writing in English, but refer the reader to the Japanese version in Yoshikawa and Shimizu (1971).

⁷ See for example Chan (1984).

⁸ See for example the *Xiao jing* (The Classic of Filial Piety).

⁹ Margus Ott presents the link between Confucian tradition and theories of embodied knowledge in Ott (2017).

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